



# COUNTRY BRIEFING GUIDE

## LAO PDR

For every child  
Health, Education, Equality, Protection  
ADVANCE HUMANITY



# LAOS AT A GLANCE



## LOCATION

A landlocked nation in Southeast Asia bordered by China, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar, the Lao People's Democratic Republic is a *Least Developed Country* at the crossroads of a dynamic and fast developing region.

## ECONOMY

With most of the population living as subsistence farmers, Laos is highly dependent on foreign aid and has a large trade deficit. Most consumer products are imported, while exports mainly depend on hydro-electricity and timber.

## POPULATION

5.7 million<sup>1</sup>

**Under 18 year olds**

2.8 million<sup>1</sup>

**Under 5 year olds**

0.9 million<sup>1</sup>

## FERTILITY RATE

4.8 children per woman<sup>2</sup>

## RURAL POPULATION

About 80%. At least 49 recognised ethnic groups

## TERRAIN

Two-thirds of the country is mountainous. The majority of the population is concentrated in the river valleys, especially along the Mekong, and the two main plains of Vientiane and Savannakhet. Forest cover is rapidly shrinking.<sup>3</sup>

## LAND AREA

236,800 sq km – slightly smaller than the United Kingdom.

## CAPITAL CITY

Vientiane



# FACTS AND FIGURES



## SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

GNI per capita (US\$) <sup>1</sup>	310
GDP per capita (US\$) <sup>4</sup>	304
Health expenditure (% of govt exp.) <sup>4</sup>	3.4
Education expenditure (% of govt exp.) <sup>6</sup>	8.5
Defence and Security expenditure <sup>2</sup>	12.6
Radio sets per 1,000 people <sup>2</sup>	145
TV sets per 1,000 people <sup>2</sup>	10
Internet users per 1,000 people <sup>4</sup>	2.7
Telephone lines per 1,000 people <sup>4</sup>	11
% Working children (% of age 5-14 yrs) <sup>4</sup>	32
Official development assistance (% of GNI) <sup>2</sup>	16
Debt service (% of exports) <sup>2</sup>	8

## STATUS OF CHILDREN AND WOMEN

Infant mortality rate per 1,000 <sup>5</sup>	82
Under five mortality rate per 1,000 <sup>9</sup>	100
Maternal mortality rate per 1,000 <sup>9</sup>	530
HIV/AIDS (reported cases) <sup>6</sup>	1,341
% Immunization coverage <sup>7</sup>	
DPT3	50
Polio3	52
Measles	42
Pregnant women Tetanus	36
% Iodized salt consumption <sup>8</sup>	75
% Exclusive breastfed 0-3 months <sup>8</sup>	26
Child Malnutrition <sup>10</sup> %	
Chronic Malnutrition: stunting	41
Acute malnutrition: wasting	15
Underweight	40
% Net enrolment Primary School <sup>8</sup>	82
boy/girl <sup>12</sup>	85/79
% Reaching grade-5 at primary level <sup>12</sup>	60
boy/girl <sup>12</sup>	60/60
% Females (15 + ) illiterate <sup>9</sup>	39
% Access to safe water urban/rural <sup>8</sup>	72/29
% Access to sanitary disposal urban/rural <sup>8</sup>	65/19

## POSITIVE TRENDS

1970-2004	Life expectancy increased from 40.4 to 54.5 years <sup>4</sup>
1990-2002	Under-5 mortality rate dropped from 163 to 100 deaths per 1,000 live births <sup>17</sup>
1990-2001	Percentage of malnourished people dropped from 29 to 22% <sup>1</sup>
1990-2002	Primary School enrolment increased from 63 to 83% <sup>4</sup>
2003	Poverty rate dropped to 29% (from 39% in 1997) <sup>15</sup>
2004	HIV prevalence has been kept to less than 0.1%, the lowest in the region <sup>4</sup>
2006	Laos on target to eliminate iodine deficiency disorders

## MODERN HISTORY

## TIMELINE

## UNICEF IN LAOS

Modern Laos defined as a political entity, becoming a French protectorate	1895		
Japanese occupation	1941		
		1952	UNICEF establishes co-operation with Laos
Full independence from France, as a constitutional monarchy	1953		
Laos becomes a member of the UN	1955		
Indochina War. Laos heavily bombed as the USA supported the royalist government against the communist <i>Pathet Lao</i>	1957-73		
		1973	UNICEF Laos office opens in Vientiane, the nation's capital
Victory of the <i>Pathet Lao</i> . Proclamation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Adoption of centrally planned economy	1975		
		1981	First Basic Agreement signed by the Lao PDR Government and UNICEF
		1982-96	First comprehensive Country Programme of Co-operation
Market economy is introduced	1986		
		1990	Government participates in World Summit for Children
Written constitution enacted. Laos ratifies the Convention on the Rights of the Child	1991	1991	Lao Government establishes the National Commission for Mothers and Children
Friendship Bridge opens over the Mekong, linking Laos and Thailand	1994		
Luang Prabang declared a World Heritage Site	1995	1995	Prime Minister decrees all salt must be iodized
Laos joins ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations	1997	1997	First Lao report to the Committee for the Rights of the Child
		2000	Laos declared Polio free
		2002	UN Special Session on Children – Lao delegation includes two children
		2003	UNICEF celebrates 30 years of activities in Laos
Vientiane hosts Mekong River Commission HQ and ASEAN summit. Government adopts National Poverty Eradication and Growth Strategy and launches Millennium Development Goals campaign jointly with UN	2004	2004	Government and UNICEF launch first national study on child trafficking

# THE LAO CONTEXT

## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS



### NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

- Single party government under the Lao People's Revolutionary Party
- National Assembly elections held every four years
- Media and judiciary state controlled
- Governance, economic and legislative reform ongoing since 1986
- Provincial governments gaining local power through decentralisation
- National NGOs are not permitted

### INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

- Becoming more engaged at an international level
- Assumes ASEAN presidency 2004 - 2005
- Stresses a foreign policy of peace and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states
- Normal Trade Relations status granted by the USA in 2004

### ECONOMY

- In the 1990s the Lao economy grew at an average rate of 6.3% per year<sup>10</sup>
- The 1998-99 Asian economic crisis halted growth
- After a period of recovery, growth now stands at around 5.8%<sup>10</sup>
- Inflation and the Lao currency, the Kip, are stable
- Growing foreign currency earners: gold, electricity and tourism
- Government plans to use hydro-electric dams to generate future growth
- Major trade partners: Thailand, Vietnam, China and more recently the EU
- Laos is close to achieving self-sufficiency in rice
- Private investment is encouraged but business opportunities in Laos still limited by bureaucracy and corruption. Tax collection systems are weak, leaving the government with permanent budget problems.



# THE LAO CONTEXT

## THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN



**73% of the Lao population live on less than \$2 a day<sup>18</sup>**

**Disparities based on geography, gender and ethnicity** are increasingly evident, exacerbated by resettlement in remote areas.

**Difficult terrain hampers development of infrastructure. Access to health, education, water and sanitation remains inadequate.** Rural and ethnic minority women and children are particularly disadvantaged.



**Child mortality rates have declined.** The infant mortality rate declined from 134 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 82 in 2000. However, child mortality rates remain among the highest in the region with the majority of deaths caused by malaria, acute respiratory infections and diarrhoea.

**The maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the region,** due to the absence of adequate pre-natal, delivery, and post-natal care.

**Routine immunization coverage is on the decline** and full immunization coverage is now only around 50%.

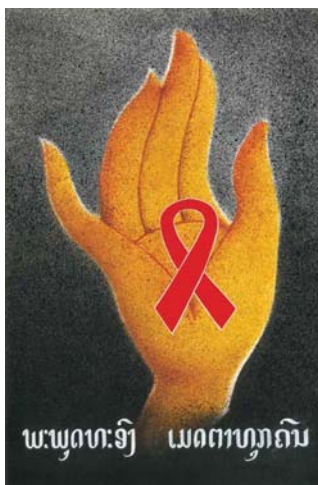


**High malnutrition rates persist:** 40% of children under five are underweight for their age. Micro-nutrient deficiencies remain a problem, though Laos has made great progress in reducing iodine deficiency.

**Despite improvements, 40% of the population still lack safe water and 65% have no sanitation facilities.** Difficult access to safe water places a major additional burden on women and girls, and poor sanitation contributes to the high incidence of disease.



## THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN



**While primary school enrolment has increased, over 142,000 school age children are still deprived of their right to education.** Girls, notably from ethnic minority communities, are particularly disadvantaged. Progress in education is hampered by low government investment, poor school facilities and an inappropriate curriculum. Teachers are often poorly qualified and inadequately paid.

**More than half the population is under 20 years of age and lacks skills and opportunities.** As the country opens up, new problems are emerging such youth migration, HIV/AIDS and cross border trafficking.

**Child protection issues have become increasingly evident in Laos** as the country moves from a closed to a market economy and opens up to its neighbours and the region. The legacy of UXO contamination continues to affect rural populations in 16 of 18 provinces. Recent data suggests that 40% of victims are children. The number of children living or working on the streets is increasing in urban areas, most aged between six and ten years. Glue sniffing, amphetamine use and prescription drugs abuse are reported to be on the rise among urban youth.

**Trafficking, particularly of girls aged 14-18, is a growing problem.** Lao children are most frequently trafficked to Thailand, where the majority end up in the domestic labour force, commercial sex industry, agriculture, sweat shops or factories. The Government recently signed a regional MOU to combat this trend.

**While Laos is still considered a low prevalence country for HIV/AIDS** the real incidence of infection may well be much higher. The country is surrounded by countries in the midst of HIV epidemics.

**Little is known about the extent to which HIV/AIDS is affecting the lives of children.** Development of facilities for the care and support of people living with HIV/AIDS - and strategies for the prevention of mother to child transmission - are in their infancy.

# UNICEF AT WORK

## Development Challenges

### HEALTH

**Achieve Millennium Development Goal 4:**

**Reduce deaths of children under five by two-thirds by 2015:**

- ensure that 80% of children under one are immunized against seven diseases in all 142 districts of the country
- maintain polio-free status
- eliminate maternal and neonatal tetanus
- virtually eradicate measles

**Improve the nutritional status of children through vitamin A coverage for 80% of young children aged 6-59 months**

**Improve the nutritional status of children and women through the elimination of iodine deficiency disorders (IDD) through universal salt iodization by 2006**

## UNICEF Actions

UNICEF is supporting the national expanded programme on immunization (EPI) through training, vaccines and cold-chain equipment and service delivery. It is working with the government and WHO to implement the 'Reaching Every District' approach. UNICEF is advocating with the government for sustained investment in maternal and child health, and is supporting community mobilization to stimulate demand for immunization services.

UNICEF is providing advocacy and support for vitamin A and iron supplementation and reduction of intestinal parasites through school deworming.

UNICEF is supporting Lao salt producers to continue producing enough iodized salt to cover 100% of human needs. It is assisting the government to control salt production quality and monitor consumers' salt consumption.

## Progress

Laos has made substantial progress in reducing child deaths but child mortality rates remain high - one in ten Lao children dies before the age of five.

Routine immunization coverage is currently only 50% and the country faces major challenges to ensure basic health services reach women and children. The government is aware of the problem and has renewed its commitment to increase EPI coverage rates.

Under-nutrition, parasite infection and vitamin A deficiency continue to be serious problems.

75% of households now consume iodized salt; iodization is a legal requirement for salt manufacturers.

If political commitment and production improvements can be maintained, by 2006 Laos could be the second country in the region to achieve USI and eliminate iodine deficiency disorders.



## Development Challenges

## UNICEF Actions

## Progress

# WATER AND SANITATION

Increase the proportion of people with access to safe drinking water by 50% by 2015

UNICEF is advocating for increased political attention to water and sanitation issues.

It is helping government agencies pipe water to rural houses and schools, and building the delivery capacity of the state rural water supply agency.

It is supporting development of a national water quality standard and a community-based water quality surveillance system.

Ensure 80% of the population have access to safe excreta disposal facilities by 2020

UNICEF is assisting with construction of latrines and septic tanks in rural villages and schools in target provinces.

Increase hygiene awareness

Support hygiene awareness in schools through health education, teacher training and deworming of school children.

Population access to safe water increased from 30 to 58% between 1990 and 2002.

National Water and Sanitation Strategy and Hygiene Law adopted in 2001.

A ministerial decree on water quality targets was approved in 2003.

42% of people now use sanitary excreta disposal.

Health and hygiene are now part of the national school curriculum.

The *Blue Box*, a hygiene education tool, has been developed and distributed to primary schools. 4,000 primary school teachers have been trained to lead children through "hygiene education games".

# EDUCATION

Achieve universal primary education by 2015 (MDG - Millennium Development Goal 2)

UNICEF is advocating with the government to increase investment in basic education, in accordance with the MDG goals.

Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education by 2015 (MDG - Millennium Development Goal 3)

UNICEF is advocating with the government to raise awareness of the importance of girls' education.

It is also supporting the creation of a child-friendly school environment, including teacher training, gender sensitization and improvement of school hygiene facilities.

The primary school enrolment rate for 2003/2004 is 82% according to the Ministry of Education – a 1% annual increase over the past five years. Laos currently has one of the lowest public education investment rates in the region, with real government spending on education having declined in recent years.

There is increased government awareness regarding the importance of girls' education. There has been a modest reduction in the gender gap in primary education, from 77 girls per 100 boys in 1991 to 84 per 100 in 2003. Accelerated investment is required for Laos to reach the MDG education targets. Teaching standards and physical conditions of schools need further improvement.

## Development Challenges

## UNICEF Actions

## Progress

# CHILD PROTECTION

Social and economic change within Laos is creating new vulnerabilities and risks for children and young people

Raise awareness about the illegality and harmful consequences of failing to protect children from violence, abuse and exploitation

Support the development of a protective environment for children and young people in Laos, including legal and social protection

UNICEF is focussing on exposing and reducing dangers to children at risk of child trafficking and abuse, child sexual exploitation, children affected by UXO, and by drugs and violence.

UNICEF is working to improve the legal response to child victims of violence, abuse and exploitation and to support children in conflict with the law.

UNICEF is active to ensure children have access to information to protect themselves from the dangers of UXO in the most heavily affected areas.

UNICEF support to the government to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Lao context:

- preparation and adoption of a comprehensive law on children
- reporting to the Committee on the Rights of the Child
- building knowledge and understanding of the Convention by local officials and teachers
- developing child friendly materials

The government is making concerted efforts to protect children, signing a regional MOU against trafficking. A National Plan of Action to Combat Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children has been drafted. A law has been adopted on the Development and Protection of Women, including child trafficking.

Child sensitive investigation procedures adopted and implemented in 6 provinces, working with the Ministry of Public Security and the People's Supreme Prosecutor. A national coordinating committee on juvenile justice has been established.

UXO risk reduction education for children has been incorporated into the school curriculum in 30 of the most heavily UXO affected districts of the country.

Awareness of child rights issues has increased, however professional skills building and concrete application of child rights principles will require a long term investment.

## Development Challenges

### HIV/AIDS

Laos is still considered a low prevalence country for HIV/AIDS, but it is at high risk since it shares borders with five countries with growing epidemics. Poverty is widespread and young people are highly vulnerable to HIV through labour migration, primarily to Thailand

Strengthen family and community-based care, and health care systems to provide support and treatment to people living with HIV/AIDS, including infected children

Prevent mother to child transmission (PMCT) by reducing the proportion of infants with HIV by 20% by 2005

## UNICEF Actions

UNICEF is supporting a Lifeskills programme for vulnerable youth, both in and out of school. In 2004, the programme reached 46,800 young people in villages, and over 10% of all fourth and fifth graders nationally.

Support for self help groups in 5 provinces, providing important social and economic support for children and adults affected by HIV and AIDS. Support Buddhist monks to give spiritual support to HIV positive families and to advocate for community acceptance and compassion.

UNICEF is helping build an innovative PMCT programme supporting Vientiane's Mother and Child hospital to supply HIV positive pregnant women with anti retroviral drugs.

## Progress

Assessments have shown increased knowledge about HIV/AIDS by young people.

People with HIV/AIDS have experienced increases in self-esteem, reduction in community discrimination and improvements in family income as a result of self help groups and community education by monks.

The Lao Government has demonstrated strong commitment to preventing mother to child transmission, and has established a National PMCT Task force.

## ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION

Create opportunities for children and young people in Laos to express themselves through the mass media

Develop the Lao media's capacity to report on priority issues affecting children, young people and families. Ensure media reporting on sensitive topics is conducted in an ethical manner which protects children

Build commitment to children's issues among government leaders, parliamentarians and mass organizations

UNICEF is supporting training of children in radio reporting, script writing and producing in four provinces.

UNICEF is supporting production and distribution of a media handbook, *Child Rights and Media Ethics in Lao PDR*, with the Lao Journalists' Association. Assistance with workshops and field reporting on issues such as child health, HIV AIDS and child trafficking. Support for child-friendly communication materials.

Support for high level advocacy outreach, including a national meeting on immunization and training for Lao National Assembly information staff.

This pilot project is providing Lao children and young people with the opportunity to learn media skills and gain confidence in expressing themselves.

Children's issues are receiving higher profile in the local media, and reports are more child-sensitive.

The *Meena* cartoon character has been adapted to the Lao context and broadcast through TV, booklets and posters.

Children's issues are slowly gaining a higher profile with government leaders and parliamentarians.



# UNICEF AT WORK

## SUPPORTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN



### SOME US DOLLAR COSTS FOR TYPICAL UNICEF WORK IN LAOS

- 39c.** Print one textbook about HIV/AIDS, drugs and reproductive health
- \$5** One child's set of textbooks and learning materials
- \$10** Annual cost of routine vaccines and injection materials for one child
- \$15** Send one child to school for a year
- \$35** One rain water jar that can store 2,000 litres
- \$45** Conduct community-based HIV/AIDS activities in one village, per year
- \$60** Produce a "Blue Box" for health and hygiene promotion in schools
- \$68** Train one teacher on Lifeskills approach to HIV/AIDS, drugs and reproductive health
- \$100** Provide one child with five years of primary education
- \$200** Train one unqualified teacher through a teacher upgrading course
- \$300** Support for an HIV positive member of a self-help group, per year
- \$500** Construct a well for a school
- \$800** Build a two-room latrine in a school
- \$3,000** Help a community create a child-friendly learning environment in their primary school
- \$4,000** Install a piped water or gravity fed water supply system for 50-70 households
- \$4,500** Operational costs to deliver 4 rounds of immunization services in one district
- \$180,000** Procure syringes and safety boxes for national immunization coverage, per year
- \$1,500,000** Costs of vaccines to immunize 80% of children nationwide, per year

# FACTS **FOR** VISITORS

## TRAVEL

The country can now be entered through a growing number of international borders, including the airports in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Visas are available on arrival at major border crossings. Direct long-haul travel is not possible: the nearest hubs are Hanoi and Bangkok. Internal flights may be subject to sudden change, while road travel can be limited by road quality and security updates.



## CLIMATE

Laos has a tropical climate with a six-month wet season from May to October. The dry season is mild to cool from November to January: jackets are required during the evening and early morning, particularly in the north of the country. From February, temperatures rise until the rains arrive.

## TOURISM

Two World Heritage Sites are attracting increasing numbers of visitors: the former royal capital, Luang Prabang, and the ancient Khmer temple of Vat Phu. Adventure and eco-tourism, exploring the mountains, forests and rivers, is also growing but numbers are still small.

## LANGUAGE

Lao is a tonal language with a phonetic script. Most ethnic minorities have their own languages. English is the language of commerce and tourism in the cities. Older, educated Lao people may speak French, while parts of the north are dominated by Chinese and parts of the south by Vietnamese.

## HEALTH

There are no health facilities operating at international standards. Minor injuries or illnesses can be treated at clinics and hospitals in Vientiane. Emergencies require evacuation to Thailand.

## CURRENCY

The Kip cannot be exchanged outside Laos. In 1994 US\$1 bought 720 Kip. In early 2005 one dollar was worth about 10,000 Kip. Thai Baht and US dollars are readily accepted in urban centres. There are a few international ATM machines in Vientiane and credit cards are accepted in some urban establishments.

## MEDIA

The Lao press, television and radio are state-controlled. Local radio is a powerful tool for reaching audiences, but due to the mountainous terrain more than half the rural population lives outside broadcasting range. Thai TV, freely viewable near the countries' borders, is more popular than Lao channels. Satellite TV and foreign press are available in the main cities, and internet use is available in the urban areas, but is relatively slow.

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## Imagery Credits

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Page 7: Poster "The Lord Buddha has compassion for all", artist: Vongsavanh Damlongsouk